

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Luke Davies, *Interferon Psalms* (Allen & Unwin, 2011)**

*Interferon Psalms* engages us in a feeling of shock revelation. Luke Davies explores illness, the end of a relationship and the disturbance of relocation. The work's profundity lies elsewhere than in these literal events. *Interferon Psalms* is about darkness and illumination.

The poem consists of five parts. There are a total of thirty-three psalms or cantos. *Interferon Psalms* won the inaugural Prime Minister's Prize for Poetry. The collection is subtitled '33 psalms on the 99 names of God'. In its meditations on suffering, the collection functions as a *Song of Praise* as much as complaint. God is variously exalted and lamented, from the grave 'O Holy One of Being' (3) to the lyrical 'O Witness, O Word, O Diadem of Beauty' (5) and even the ironic 'O Infinite One, O Restorer, / O Guide, O Enricher' (25). The exaltations and laments multiply. In deliverance mode, the final psalm praises God's making in the world as much as expresses the speaker's throes of happiness and pain. The canto opens with:

God has made laughter  
—*I behaved myself wisely in a perfect way—*

continues further below with:

God has made laughter for me, and all who hear of it  
will laugh  
—*Oxygen was the fabric of my exultation—*

and concludes this section of the canto with:

God has made laughter  
—*Everything present at once, as it always was—* (107-108)

In its unfolding, the poem reveals the awe of a physical struggle transformed into a spiritual agon. As the speaker says,

Skin turned to scale. Head peeled away. I am Reptile,  
hear me roar. (3)

The exalted language of spiritual darkness and illumination does business with the mock language of the ordinary. In a secular age not given to elations of feeling, what language is a poet to use when they find themselves in a state of despair? In psalm 32, the speaker provides an answer:

One becomes more completely a poet  
In travelling from Babylon to Jerusalem. (106)

Such lines suggest that *Interferon Psalms* is a poem about making art as much as suffering. Through the speaker's referencing of his suffering, *Interferon Psalms* assumes its position as

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a tonally layered meditation on existential anguish and deliverance. The speaker signals the layered terrain of *Interferon Psalms* when he begins with the mock incantation:

Lift up our hearts.  
Lift up our hearts. So then, lift up our hearts. (3)

The speaker may exhort us to lift up our hearts, in the tradition of a congregation, but he does so with the exhaustion of a secular man doing push-ups for the first time. This exhaustion may be the effect of his treatment with interferon, a drug for clearing the system of Hepatitis C, but the speaker's illness, loss and dislocation become metaphors for a deeper struggle for deliverance. As the speaker says, 'On this earth I learned all about suffering' (3). The speaker, steeped in Biblical and other imagery, floods the dry shores of consternation with the rich waters of the sacred. As a mock spiritual text, *Interferon Psalms* becomes the record of a holy struggle. Like a mystic seeking an encounter with God, the speaker must submit to the disorienting confusions of his treatment with interferon:

I would write nothing, from the perfect centre of a  
monstrous place, O Holy One of Being. Nothing at all: that  
was my plan. I had to gather the forces of my memory and  
I had to trust my memory. But first I had to allow sheer  
bewilderment to flow through me. (3-4)

His treatment unfolds as his relationship breaks apart and he himself must come to terms with geographic dislocation. He tries to connect with his lover, 'but she gave no traction' (20). In his geographic dislocation, he wonders:

But how can we sing the world song  
In a strange land? (27)

The speaker's course of treatment also brings back to mind his previous drug use. There is dismay and bittersweet recollection:

I remembered my boon companion, a black-bottomed  
spoon. That was a journey and a half! My heart was  
grieved. I was pricked in my veins. (13)

In his condition of pain and other effects of the treatment, in which the speaker cries for mercy and his life is a vapour (31), personal memory and universal remembrance enfold into one another. The speaker recalls how twenty years earlier he was snapped out of his abstraction and he stopped hurting himself (5). In near-hallucinatory state, he witnesses the passing of the aeons. What might be the price for such witnessing? In the second psalm or canto, the speaker reflects on the passing of the ages and on the compromised future:

The ice came back. If you sped up the centuries you could  
hear the morains screeching.

Retreated too. The forests grew again. We would have gone insane with the dripping of the leaves had we been around to hear it. But millions of years passed first. Psychiatry, cathedrals, they hadn't been invented. The rain leached minerals from the ground. Nothing could even take hold as future fossil. (11)

Like a latter-day Dante lost in the woods in the middle of his life, the speaker must confront the reality that 'In the centre of my life I lost its centre' (4). Lost, he must traverse the uneasy terrain of the human condition. His own being threatens to dissolve:

The blade of my happiness broke at the hilt. I flailed,  
without balance, at air. A break at the hilt is a hard break  
to fix. Life in search of a blacksmith. of bellows and tongs  
I knew little. (4)

Ironically, the speaker's karmic debt, his heroin addiction, becomes his karmic release. Whatever the speaker makes out of his illness, the reality is that 'I had imagined many futures but never interferon' (71). Yet interferon is the drug that might heal the legacy of addiction. This is the aching mockery of salvation through the symbol of one's nemesis:

From troubled dreams, the smell of acetate. The membrane  
through which inner and outer exchanged their currency  
was now known as the syringe. Medicinal use only. I had  
long since forgotten its ways. And now you are a 'good  
boy', like a dog. (51)

In the poem's complex articulation of suffering, the chaotic rumble of human existence, from pain to joy, sounds like a bell. In psalmist mode, the speaker says, 'The luminous meets the tenuous; Lord, hear our prayer' (38). Perhaps the one place where celebration and suffering can come together is in poetry, not as release, but as revelation. As the speaker says in psalm or canto twenty-five:

I returned to the poem, the one true place,  
Whose blood was the syntax,  
Whose body was the word. (79)

If such lines work it is because the speaker undoes his own lyricism:

Thus I felt fortunate to have had  
Much experience with blood. (79)

But he also alerts us to the necessity of such tonal play:

Part of the challenge of being heroic:  
The object of my desperation would desert me.

But the desperation wouldn't. (79)

To let such lines wash over one is to experience the lyrical in extravagant flight. The speaker plays with the poem's own compelling reason for being. In self-conscious mode, he says, 'A hummingbird found his way into my poem, look!' (82). It is precisely this tension of the lyrical mode between extravagant flight and ironic interjection that renders the language of *Interferon Psalms* and the poem itself compelling. The hummingbird might fly into the poem, but

It sucked from the stamen of unease  
Until unease was dry, and useless. (82)

This is a poem that becomes a testament to anguish and joy in a language drawn self-consciously from the canon of suffering and celebration. It succeeds because it releases and reins in its ecstasies in equal measure.

**Tina Giannoukos**